

[Search](#)[Dashboard](#) ▼[Login or Signup](#)[Introductory Socialist Night School](#) ▼**Published on** Jan 31, 2023[SHOW DETAILS](#) ⬮

What is Socialism?

by DSA NPEC

Published on Jan 31, 2023

 last released
2 years ago[CITE](#) [#][SOCIAL](#) <[DOWNLOAD](#) ↓[CONTENTS](#) ≡

Module Preview

This module has two related goals. The first is to discuss why socialists aim to replace capitalism with an entirely different system called “socialism,” rather than reforming capitalism to make it better for working people. The second is to consider what the system of socialism is that we are working to achieve. While it is not possible to specify the details of a future socialism in advance, we must develop a vision of a plausible socialist alternative to capitalism that can inspire masses of working people to go beyond capitalism.

Ever since ancient times, there have been people fighting for more equality, democracy, and social justice. But the modern political doctrine of

socialism and the movements associated with it only emerged in the last few centuries. Since then, socialists contributed to winning voting rights, minority rights, worker rights, progressive taxation, welfare states, and the overthrow of colonial rulers. Still, we confront an unjustly unequal world between and within countries.

The legacy of the Red Scare and Cold War in America, when socialists and communists were purged from public life and official positions, means that a new generation of activists are redefining socialism. But we insist that it means more than just a new New Deal: workers must own the means of production and run society for themselves.

Socialism cannot be accomplished by philosophers or scientists. The working class can only come to power by its own patient efforts. This will require vibrant social movements, a militant labor movement, strong and democratic socialist organizations like DSA, and elected officials advocating our politics to the public and denouncing the hypocrisy of the ruling class. And we must focus not only on the unfair economic aspects of our capitalist system, but also the legal disenfranchisement of so many in our society and the structural racism that comes with it.

The three readings present several arguments about socialism. While socialists fight to win immediate improvements for working people and other oppressed groups, that is not enough. Socialists engage in reform struggles while working toward replacement of capitalism by a different system. Socialists seek to influence current state policies and eventually win full power for working people, which requires building popular power outside as well as inside the state.

To build a powerful socialist movement, we must offer a vision of the alternative socialist society we aim to build. The core idea is a society that empowers the people in the economy and the state. Economic planning must be organized so that the economy responds to people's needs and wants in an environmentally sustainable way. Workers will have a big say in decisions at work. With no class of wealthy owners of enterprises, there will no longer be class conflict between capital and labor. However, there will be conflicts of interest among some groups such as workers, consumers, and community members, which should be resolved in ways that are acceptable to all groups. Potential conflicts between the wishes of people living in one location and the needs of society as a whole will

be resolved through negotiation and compromise.

Socialists debate some questions about a future socialism: What role should buying and selling in markets, which is central to capitalism, play in a socialist economy? How can the negative effects of market competition as it exists in capitalism be avoided in a socialist society? How can the burden of labor be shared equitably in a socialist system? How can democracy and individual liberty be guaranteed in a future socialism?

In this module you will find:

1. Readings:

1. Democratic socialism, explained by a democratic socialist
2. Building Socialism from Below: Popular Power and the State
3. Socialism for Realists

2. Discussion Guide

3. In-depth Questions for Each Reading

4. Further Readings

**Reading A: “Democratic socialism, explained by a democratic socialist”
by Meagan Day**

(4 pages, 3 minute read)

Background

Meagan Day, a DSA member and staff writer for Jacobin, wrote this essay in Vox to explain the goals of democratic socialism and respond to common misconceptions about democratic socialists. Since 2016 the mass support for self-declared democratic socialist Bernie Sanders for president and the election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to Congress brought democratic socialism into the limelight of mainstream political commentary. However, there are many misconceptions about the goals of rapidly growing organizations like DSA.

Day distinguishes between socialists and those who just want to reform capitalism. She points out limits to reform within capitalism, noting that the capitalist class will try to take back any advances won through the struggle of workers. The article gives examples of contemporary institutions that embody socialist principles such as Britain's National Health Service. She considers how the struggle for reforms can contribute to the ultimate goal of replacing capitalism with socialism. She calls for ending "society's subservience to the market."

See below for some suggested discussion questions for your group.

Reading B: “Building Socialism from Below: Popular Power and the State” **by Ben Tarnoff**

(10 pages, 25 minute read)

Background

Responding to the swelling socialist movement, Tarnoff builds on the work of Nicos Poulantzas and “Eurocommunism” to illustrate how growing a socialist movement requires both competing within the institutions of the state (for example through elections) and developing an autonomous layer of “people power” to act on the state. This essay blends an analysis of tactics and strategy for the socialist movement with a vision of the ultimate goal of a democratic socialism that will have both a transformed state and transformed civil society.

You can watch this 12 minute video featuring the writer, Ben Tarnoff, explaining the basic argument in this reading.

Or listen to this NPEC CLASS podcast episode for a discussion of the reading among DSA National Political Committee members.

See below for some suggested discussion questions for your group.

Reading C: “Socialism for Realists” (Abridged) by Sam Gindin

(11 pages, 35 minute read)

Background

Gindin stresses the importance of establishing the feasibility of an alternative socialist society for the development of a strong socialist movement. He presents a vision of a future socialism. Gindin poses important questions that a socialist society will have to figure out.

If you are not able to finish this article, you can check out this helpful [summary of the main arguments of the article](#) (1 page, 3 minute read).

If you would like to listen to a podcast episode accompanying this reading to hear current National Political Committee members of DSA discuss this question check out the [NPEC podcast Class](#).

[See below for some suggested discussion questions](#) for your group.

Discussion Guide

If no one has prepared notes for the discussion, have one or two members read out the [Module Preview](#).

Objectives: Learning about the revolutionary goals of socialists, as distinct from progressives and social democrats.

Core concepts:

- Socialists support struggles for reform within capitalism but as part of the drive to move beyond capitalism to socialism.
- Socialist struggle happens on multiple fronts and terrains, and must include an independent component of socialist organization.
- Socialists have to talk about what socialism would look like in order to convince other people it's worth fighting for.
- A socialist society and economy would be a profoundly democratic one, and one based on human needs not profits.
- Even in a socialist society we would need to have priorities and make decisions that wouldn't satisfy everyone at all times. That is why democracy is key.

Sample questions:

Open ended questions that anyone can answer are a great way to get a conversation going (try a go-around if the group is small, or break out into groups if the group is very large):

1. How are socialists different from “New Deal” liberals or progressives?
2. What reforms do you think are socialist? How do they advance socialism?
3. There is an argument that the socialist movement needs to include organized groups autonomous of the state and state representatives. Do you think that’s true? Why or why not?
4. Do you think workers can run their own company democratically? Can they run a state?
5. What do you think a socialist society will look like?

Possible exercise:

In pairs or threes ask people to come up with a response to one of the following questions to present to the group (you can experiment here with each pair/three responding to one question and bringing it to the group for the group to respond to, or by having all the groups respond to the same question)*:

1. Is the role of the state likely to expand under socialism, or will it shrink? What state responsibilities might expand, and which ones might shrink or even disappear?
2. Under capitalism economic decisions are made by capitalists aiming for maximum

profit. What group or groups should make economic decisions under socialism? Should it be just workers at each enterprise? Or should other groups also be involved?

3. How should decisions be made? By majority vote? By negotiation and compromise? How can democracy and individual liberty be guaranteed in a future socialism?

*If members of the same group disagree about the response, let them know in advance that they can present their differing points of view, and the lines of debate. Encourage participants to always use “I” statements.

Finish with a go-around of all participants: what is one thing you hadn’t thought of before this discussion that came up? Or one question you still have? What is something you would want someone else to take away from this discussion?

In depth discussion questions for each reading

Reading and discussing **Democratic socialism explained:**

- What are some of the misconceptions floating around the term “democratic socialism”?
- How do democratic socialists differentiate themselves from “New Deal” liberals or

progressives?

- How do reforms like Medicare for All advance the struggle of the working class?
- How does the struggle for reforms fit into the larger project of worker' power and the transition to socialism?

Reading and discussing **Building Socialism**

From Below:

- Tarnoff talks about the US left's impulse to "just do something." Can you think of an example where the US left has responded to a crisis in a way that was mostly reactive? What could the US left have done in that instance to present a more positive programmatic vision?
- According to Tarnoff, socialism requires a layer of groups that are autonomous of the State. Why does Tarnoff say that an autonomous layer is required?
- What should the relationship be between socialist elected officials and the parties or organizations they represent? How should they relate to the working class movement in general?
- If today's struggles are about social reproduction (people's need to reproduce themselves and their society), then what direction does that suggest for socialists? How can we focus on this crisis in social reproduction -- what might social

reproduction look like within a socialist system?

Reading and discussing **Socialism For Realists**:

- Is it important for the socialist movement to present a vision of an alternative system to replace capitalism? If so, why is that important? If not, why not?
 - Should any privately owned companies be allowed under socialism? Why or why not?
 - What roles should markets play in a socialist system, if any?
 - Gindin writes that there would be a tension (contradiction) “within individuals since these individuals are always workers, consumers, and participants in community life”? What is that tension? What is the best way to accommodate the needs of all three groups under socialism?
 - Is the role of the state likely to expand under socialism, or will it shrink? What state responsibilities might expand, and which ones might shrink or even disappear?
-

Further Readings

1. “Democracy, Participation and Social Planning. (Abridged) by Fikret Adaman and Pat Devine (Abridged) OR read this SUMMARY of the main arguments.

2. “Socialism for the Twenty-First Century,” by Robin Hahnel
3. “Why Socialism?” by Albert Einstein
4. Woman and Socialism, by August Bebel
5. “On The Day After the Socialist Revolution,” Karl Kautsky

Connections

1 of 2 children and siblings   

A Supplement to this Pub

Main Points of Gindin, “Socialism for Realists”

by DSA NPEC

Hide Description · Published on Dec 27, 2022 ·
dsa-education.pubpub.org

A supplement to the "What is Socialism?" module

LICENSE •  Creative Commons
Attribution 4.0
International License
(CC-BY 4.0)

COMMENTS • 0    

? [Login to discuss](#)



No comments here

Why not start the discussion?